



COMMENT



<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03459-7>

OPEN

# Towards a 'single-minded' social science that matters

Christopher R. Matthews  <sup>1</sup>✉

Social science is not as it should be – I think we have lost contact with what matters. Many scholars have made similar laments and directed their attention at disciplines in an attempt to mark out a more virtuous and effective future. Such attempts are valuable, but in taking aim at this disciplinary level they miss two important features of academic life. That is, while the social sciences are clearly more than the sum of their parts, they are still made up of parts – you, I, us, and other 'rank and file' academics. And that although our disciplines are multifarious, there are common features that sit at the core of all good social science. By focusing at these two levels, I outline the objective ethical and moral foundations from which we can each enhance our ability to produce free-thinking and free-wheeling but still rigorous research in socially progressive directions towards foundationally similar, if various, ends – a 'single-minded' social science that matters.

Within this commentary, I make the case for a 'single-minded' approach to developing, designing and doing good social science. This should not be confused with a 'close-minded' approach, rather, becoming 'single-minded' requires us to work in an open way to find objectively ethically and morally significant directions for our efforts. There is a forthright and committed approach which follows from doing this which sits at the foundation of the argument here, and more broadly my research and that of the people I work with. As an initial way 'in' to considering these points I will first explore the meaning and utility of the notion of being 'single-minded', the rest of my arguments flow from this starting point.

## The meaning and utility of being 'single-minded'

I'm single-minded – despite causing me some problems, *overall, it's a good thing*. Single-minded people are often thought to be determined to achieve something, have clear resolve, and are persistent in what they're doing. This is a positive take on being single-minded. A counter interpretation could focus on someone's obstinance, pig-headedness, and unconsidered defiance.

These descriptions mean pretty much the same thing – having a unitary focus on something – but what is different about them is the *value judgement* that sits at the core of the behaviours that follow from such a way of approaching life. For example, I might consider a colleague who is *consistently* critical of the ways female staff are treated in the workplace to be making *considered, decisive* and *determined* statements. While I'd assess a colleague who *doggedly* continues to defend outdated ways of teaching and assessing undergraduate students as 'the way', to be *stubborn* in unconsidered and self-defeating ways. The key is that in both cases – but in very different ways and for very different reasons – these two people appear to be strongly committed to doing what they think is the right thing.

Being 'single-minded' doesn't necessarily have to have an evaluation attached to it. When thinking of the term in this sense, we're using it to describe a *determined and focused way of approaching the world*. If we consider the actions that flow from such an approach, that's often where we might assess value. Stated differently, it is the context in which someone's single-mindedness is developed and the outcomes that come from it, which produce our assessment as to whether someone is

<sup>1</sup>Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK. ✉email: [christopher.matthews@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:christopher.matthews@ntu.ac.uk)

resolutely determined to follow ‘their calling’ or foolishly focused on flights of fancy. In such cases the behaviours could be the same, but they could be interpreted quite differently. I’m highlighting, that, like most things involving people, ideas, behaviours and such like, subjectivity plays a role in these assessments. But to leave our considerations here is insufficient because there are also ways in which we can interrogate the objectively positive and/or negative status of such ways of doing stuff. I’ll elaborate on the examples from the last paragraph.

My colleague who speaks up about women being poorly treated is continuing a long line of feminist inspired local activism. This is not simply because it *ought* to be the right thing to do, it’s because it *is* the right thing to do. At the core of such efforts is an *objectively ethical and moral approach to the world* – that is, if women, or anyone for that matter, are suffering unnecessarily in some form, because of traditional ways of approaching social relations that favour one group over another, such things are wrong, bad and should be challenged until they stop. To argue otherwise, and to suggest that unnecessary suffering is not objectively bad – is ‘only’ a subjective phenomenon – is to fall foul of the most insipid and cowardly aspects of strong social constructionism. Such ‘mere’ constructions of life tend to get thrown around when people unthinkingly say things like “it’s all relative” – meaning there is no right or wrong, and morality therefore equals positionality. And to add such primacy to the subjective dimension of objective suffering is akin to someone telling you to think past the pain you feel when you’re seriously hurt or ill. There is a material, embodied, immediacy and emotionality which makes such a ‘stoic’ approach to reconsidering pain a romantic myth – the stuff of Hollywood films, ‘gurus’, and shady tricksters.

And, of the other colleague who is stuck in their pedagogical ways – I get it, I’ve been their myself; we develop in academia teaching in certain ways and it can feel like contemporary shifts are a backwards step. But within the moves to ‘trendy’ new approaches, neoliberal shifts and increasing dominance of audit culture, there are technologies, ideas and ways of working that *can* better support students learning, help them take control of their education and, in various ways, flourish while studying with us. So, while ‘the right ways’ might have worked for us, there’s other ways that we can help us connect with more students and especially those who have traditionally been excluded from education. It might require someone to help us grasp when we’re in such situations, that’s because it’s hard to assess what we’re ‘in’ when we’re ‘in’ it. And when this happens, such critical friends might encourage us to better understand how our determined behaviours are hurting students and stopping them from flourishing as they could. This can help shift our single-minded approach by highlight that which is taking place in a more accurate, ‘reality congruent’, light. In this way, our colleague might resolve to learn from other staff who seem to have success and figure out ways to change their approach, so it works better for their students.

What I’m trying to mark out as clear, is the importance of accepting that things can be good and/or bad – in particular, that even within these quite undramatic examples it’s clear that we humans have the capacity to suffer and flourish (I develop this point in more detail below). This is a bold assertion that most of us grasp quite clearly in our lives but might shy away from when we do our social science. I get the academic impulse to be tentative around such claims. This has come about as generations of scholars have had their own privileged and/or unconsidered positions in the world – from which they unreflectively pronounce and pontificate – challenged and undercut. This is obviously a worthwhile intellectual exercise. But such ‘inward’ criticality, has produced a timidity in critique which Andrew

Sayer rightly highlights as disempowering (2011). *We need to be able to say when things are not as they should be*, and follow such statements with actions, which are repeated and/or reconsidered until things are as they should be. This is how we most usually, or *should*, approach problems in our own lives, and at its core is the utility of a single-minded approach which builds from the rightness or wrongness of the situations in which we find ourselves. I see no reason why we shouldn’t adopt such an approach when we do our science.

### A single-minded moan about social science

*‘Social Science’ is not as it should be.* What I mean is that the structures within which we do our work – that is the ‘business’ of academia – are messed up in various ways. Elsewhere I made it clear how I think the way people approach designing, delivering and especially writing about social scientific methodologies is pretty poor, so I will not focus on continuing those comments here (Matthews, [forthcoming](#)). The problem I want to try to tackle here, and I draw in various ways on scholars such as Flyvbjerg (2001), Lyng and Franks (2002), Sayer (2011) and the epistemological dept we all owe to feminist scholarship, is that ‘social science’ has lost ‘contact’ with what matters. That is, many of us have over-corrected in response to post-structural critiques which, while important in refining scientific analysis, have ripped the heart out of some scholar’s intellectual claims to know stuff about things that matter.<sup>1</sup>

You see, the insightful, correct and critical epistemological claim made by various feminist scholars – that all human knowledge is necessarily shaped by the historical, social and cultural processes out of which it emerges (Harding, 1991, 2009; Sprague, 2016) – has been confused by some, to mean the knowledge we produce is no more valid, refined nor robust, than other truth claims. And, of course, that is simply wrong. In this regard, the refrain that there is ‘no knowledge from nowhere’ has lured some people into acting as if we have ‘no knowledge of anything’.<sup>2</sup>

So, while we must try to capture key features of the personal, political and embodied positions which shape the work we do, that does not, and must not, stop us from making claims about the relative adequacy of the knowledge we produce. We must return to confidently claiming we have rich and robust – but ultimately epistemologically fallible – knowledge about stuff that matters. And, when we align this embolden academic approach with an acceptance of the inherent human capacity for suffering and flourishing, we can mark out situations, actions, and phenomena, as objectively good or bad things. Here we are tapping into a thread of thought that can be traced throughout recorded human history as scholars, priests, poets, artists and many more have grappled with what constitutes a worthy, good, and moral life. Recent contributions within the philosophy and theory of social science have expanded these considerations and, as such, provide various useful insights. But before exploring those ideas and establishing my main thesis, I want to briefly deal with the ‘elephant in the room’ – that there is no such thing as a ‘single mind’.

### The myth of the ‘single-mind’

Being a sociologist by training I’m sceptical of the notion of ‘mind’ – especially when considered as some sort of internal ‘thing’ doing cognitive ‘things’ in a single, unitary or monolithic way. I find much more theoretical and empirical utility in approaching ‘the mind’, following someone like George Herbert Mead, who did so much to undercut such individualistic and atomised theorising (2015 [1934]).<sup>3</sup> From this way of thinking, the historical, cultural and social processes that we are born into,

and then live in between as we develop, mature and socialise, are central features of how our thoughts, notions of self and ‘internal’ cognitive phenomena emerge – it is the outcome of the internalisation and embodiment of such social processes that people tend to consider as their ‘minds’.

I might think I have a streak of single-mindedness, but I don’t think it resides ‘in my mind’. Rather, it’s a tendency in how I behave and think which is re-established, re-worked and re-considered in different ways in different situations as I age. And in relation to my academic work, it can’t be considered in isolation from the epistemological relationships that have been central to how I see the world. That is, I’ve learned from various people how I think one should do things, and when it comes to the social science I led, others have learned parts of this approach from me. This is not a passive receiving of information, but an engaged and engaging act of considering and reflecting on the sort of scholar and, ultimately, human being, I/they want to be.

In that regard, the analysis that I’m developing here began to develop as I sought to grasp a coherent direction of travel for the scholars I formally advise. I enjoy asking them questions like “so what?” As in, “what’s the point of your work, why should anyone be bothered?” I’m not uncaring about how I deliver such questions, rather, they’re part of an ongoing supportive pedagogy designed to help them find or produce an understanding of why their work matters.<sup>4</sup> In doing this for several developing scholars, I’ve found myself asking such questions more broadly of academic disciplines. This is then a dialogue between me, the people I advise, but also me and academia more broadly, as I seek to gain a better grasp of what matters. This process of supporting others, thinking in dialogue with published social science, and engaging with philosophy, is how I have developed my ‘single-minded’ approach. That is, becoming ‘single-minded’, should not be understood as in any way something that is done by a ‘single mind’.

I don’t offer these reflections to undercut my analysis. After all, I’m using the idea as a heuristic rather than an empirically verifiable concept, so its utility is retained despite its formal inaccuracy. But what this part of my discussion does highlight are key features in the social development of ‘single-mindedness’ – how one might become thus and what factors could and should inform that process. And this can help us to move past some of the more unconsidered, misdirected and wrong ways in which someone might work in determined, resolute and unwavering directions. That is, if we think of the underlying social processes at work here, we can start to imagine a version of social science that matters so much, and in such empirically verifiable ways, that we might become positively and justifiably ‘single-minded’ in how we approach our work – *overall, that would be a good thing.*

### **Towards a ‘single-minded’ social science that matters**

Social scientists, quite obviously, often focus on the social nature of human beings – the clue, I guess, is in the name. And, when various attempts have been made in the past to push ‘social science’ towards various social goods, these have often focused, quite rightly, on carving out scholars’ place in politically progressive social movements and undertakings. An interesting example of this can be drawn from American sociology, wherein successive academics have lamented the direction(less nature) of the discipline and offered discussions designed to lead colleagues to some more virtuous and effective academic and intellectual place (see Berger, 2002; Burawoy, 2005; McClung, 1976). By focusing attention at a disciplinary level, such works, and others like them, necessarily pay less attention to the place of ‘rank and file’ academics who tend to exist in worlds of work which are very much

focused on individual and local measurements of success. And, as such, while the impulse to provide clear leadership at a disciplinary level is important, it does miss that we scholars have our focus, on ‘our thing’, which is shaped by local pressures and rewards – this means that we will often find it challenging to think and work in ways others lay out that might be appropriate or good for ‘the discipline’ more broadly.

What these works miss is a more considered and sustained appreciation of how academic disciplines, while certainly more than the sum of their parts, are still made of parts – that is, they emerge from a collection of interdependent but also relatively independent people with idiosyncratic motivations. Of course, some of these people are centrally focused on maintaining and enhancing the ‘health’ and social significance of their discipline, however, more still will focus on maintaining and enhancing their career. As such, they will likely take direction from line-managers, heads of department and local research leaders who they work with daily. To these academics, and I count myself amongst them, pronouncing that you’re going to follow some American sociologists’ [insert your disciplinary leaders here] ideas, over and above local guidance is a pretty tough call.

Now, local leadership will often focus on (potentially parochial) local problems – gaining more funding/prestige for the department, insipid metrics flowing from an unconsidered commitment to audit culture, encouraging scholars to match their effort to the whims and fancies of researcher ‘leaders’, and various other ways of working that do not necessarily hold objectively moral and ethical features of social science as guiding principles. In this respect, we can’t rely on local leaders to have a coherent and sustained focus on wider and more significant problems that social science can and should address. Having the fortitude to reject their direction can be challenging, and in some cases, it is not an option if someone wants to maintain their employment or gain promotion. But, when scholars are ‘established’,<sup>5</sup> it becomes possible, and I will argue our moral duty, to find ways of working that transcend local guidance if it is not founded in a robustly ethical and moral approach.

Also, while I understand the impulse for disciplinary leaders to focus in detail on the problems they, and their close colleagues face, it does reinforce quite a narrow approach to considering academia.<sup>6</sup> In that regard, while our disciplines are multifarious and complex, there are philosophical features that sit at the foundation of *all good social science*. And we can, if we take aim at this level, pull out common qualities to focus on. In combining a focus on individual persons and the pressures they might face, and underlying features of social science, I think we can leverage some of my preceding comments about ‘single-mindedness’ to help scholars work in ways that quite clearly demarcate a social science that matters. And in this way, we can enhance our ability to produce free-thinking and free-wheeling but still rigorous researchers who work in socially progressive directions towards foundationally similar, if various, ends – *a ‘single-minded’ social science that matters.*

Bent Flyvbjerg, in *Making Social Science Matter* (2001), does an excellent job of outlining a future for the broad academic area in which we work. He suggests social science’s distinctive strengths have been downplayed, or perhaps cast in shadow, by implicit and sometimes explicit attempts to match the epistemological impulses that flow from mirroring ‘natural’ scientific approaches that can provide relatively clear predictions and thus strive toward ‘objective’ testing, findings and knowledge claims. He calls instead for us to embrace the ‘universality of hermeneutics’,<sup>7</sup> that is, the interpretative nature of all human knowledge, and more fully accept the consequences this offers for our work.

This then involves developing social science that, amongst many other things,<sup>8</sup> gets close to peoples’ lives and their



communities to produce knowledge with such groups in engaging and engaged research – the recent (re)turn to coproduction would be an example of this (for a critical take on this please see Hiemstra and Matthews, 2024). He concludes that the purpose of a social science that matters is not to develop (predictive) theory, but instead to “contribute to society’s practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests. The goal... becomes one of contributing to society’s capacity for value-rational deliberation and action” (2001, 167, also see Matthews forthcoming for a discussion, especially in the conclusion).

Flyvbjerg (2001) is calling for us to focus more intently on the world of practical concerns – lived understandings – ‘out there’<sup>9</sup>. Lyng and Franks (2002) work in a different way to grasp something of why we humans have a world of concerns which shape the quality of our lives. From them, we can take their sustained focus on the emotions as real, immediate, and powerful features of social life. Our emotions offer us ‘resistance’ – they cannot simply be socially constructed to mean something else – and in focusing on such experience we can make more refined empirical ‘contact’ with why things matter to people. That is, while our emotional experiences of the world are obviously just that, ‘ours’, and therefore crucially subjective, they’re not also some pure ‘inner world’ of subjectivity. They emerge as we go through our lives socially interacting with others, they shape our very existence in those worlds, and they ‘project’ away from us as others ‘see’ and ‘feel’ our emotionality as real experiences that they can try to understand – they can be objects within others’ experiences. These two texts, taken together, help us grasp why communities have important concerns about things, and this mattering will be manifest in their very real – as in not merely subjective and therefore ‘all relative’ – emotional responses.<sup>10</sup>

This analysis is bolstered by Sayer’s sustained focus on human suffering and flourishing which he explores in *Why Things Matter to People* (2011). You see, we are by our nature, what he, drawing on MacIntyre (2009) and Midgely (1993), calls, ‘needy beings’ and without our needs being satiated we *suffer*, become unhealthy and eventually might die. We are also beings capable of *flourishing* in many forms, at the core of this is our intertwined biological, psychological and sociological health and wellbeing. While most of our most basic requirements (which must be addressed to reduce needless suffering and enabling flourishing) are regularly met by the contemporary organisation of human group life, especially in the Global North, there are still many ways in which our lives revolve around managing these features of the human condition. That is, if we are cold, we seek out shelter, if we are hungry, we usually try to eat, if we feel lonely, we tend to look for companionship, and if we feel scared, disrespected, or undervalued, we will seek, perhaps ineffectively, ways to mitigate such experiences.

Sayer marks out this foundational understanding of our social nature and ties it to the delivery of ethical social science and ethical life more broadly. While his argument is quite detailed, my reading of it, for the purposes of what I’m presenting here, can be distilled to a simple idea, that is; *social science that matters, seeks to reduce unnecessary human suffering and enhance human flourishing*. In grasping these two intertwined and objective features of the human condition – while still maintaining space for their more-or-less mediation, moderation, and thus manifestation within social processes – Sayer quite expertly provides a foundation upon which an ethical and moral analysis can be built. That is, a way of developing, designing and doing our scholarship in ways that matter beyond what disciplinary leaders, heads of department and line-managers might suggest we do, can be carved out. *In*

*this direction, and I speak from experience here, lies research that proceeds from a single-minded sense of duty to work in objectively moral and ethical directions.*

An obvious counter to what I have outlined here is that we scholars should be ‘open-minded’. This would be a confused critique, because, single-minded scholars, as I’m proposing them, are not ‘close-minded’, rather, we do the necessary work to understand the *greater purpose* that underpins our actions and career – our ‘so what’. This requires an openness to axiology – the study of values – which should develop across our career as we consider the requirements of our jobs, the motivations of local research leaders and managers, as well as personal motivations in relation to career progression, doing research that matters in various ‘small’ and ‘bigger’ ways, and contributing to the reduction of unnecessary suffering and enhancing flourishing. To do the latter – which is where I think we should be trying to focus most of our attention – requires an openness to data; to others and our own research, especially that which highlights important features of how the empirical worlds we share with our participants, may not be as they should. That is, they are incorrect, wrong, or bad in some knowable form, and, as such, need changing.

Of course, there is a long history of scholars being drawn to do exactly this. Think of feminist (Harding, 2009), post-colonial (Go, 2023) and indigenous (Tur et al. 2010) studies and standpoint epistemologies wherein scholars, activists and co-researchers are deliberately and overtly drawn to such work because of the avoidable suffering that various communities experienced historically and contemporarily (also see Hiemstra and Matthews, 2024). Scholars working to reduce the damage caused by global warming, child abuse, medical malpractice, modern slavery and much more can all point in clear ways to the objective morality at the core of their work in terms of its ability to reduce unnecessary suffering. So, while I’m confident that ‘social science’ is not as it should be, these examples of powerful and important research also mean I’m equally confident that we can be more fully engaged in debates about the values embedded in our work in order to overcome the issues I highlighted above.

What I expect should flow from such personal processes – our work finding what objectively matters in our research – is a sharpness of critique which, as I discussed earlier, has been blunted by an overcorrection to important epistemological comments about the positionality of scholars’ claims. Adding back this ‘edge’ in a cautious way, can stop some of the dithering that comes as we overly deconstruct our own knowledge claims as some scholars fear not getting it ‘perfectly right’. You see, wrongness is a part of science, and being open to it is essential – so rather than fear it, we should do what we can to protect against it while still moving forward in important ways to address when things are not as they should be.

Let me be clear, I’m calling for clear value judgements to be made by us, and our colleagues, about the work we do. That some social science objectively matters more than others should be something we can say to, and explore with, each other. Pig-headedness or unconsidered obstinance should not flow from this. Rather, following Becker, 2017, we should honestly frame our analysis as “consist[ing] of guesses, that seem plausible to [us], and [we] hope you, on the basis of evidence [we’ve] provided” (Becker, 2017, 6). And to extend Becker’s argument, the value of such efforts is fundamentally tied to how our single-minded approaches are founded in the justifications that we should be able to point to as providing the moral direction of our endeavours. This is what a single-minded social science that matters looks like – and I commend it to you as an excellent starting point from which to develop, design and do your future work and that of scholars you lead.

Received: 17 May 2024; Accepted: 9 July 2024;  
Published online: 28 September 2024

## Notes

- 1 See Matthews and Pocock (forthcoming) for a discussion of how this way of thinking about research philosophy as a practical part of research can help give the next generation of scholars its critical 'bite' back.
- 2 For discussions around this point see Bernstein (1983), Brown (1994), Sayer (2011) and Stones (1996).
- 3 Also see Schutz (1970) and for more recent contributions that do a neat job of synthesising classic theoretical contributions see Crossley (1999) and Burkitt (2008).
- 4 For a recent discussion around these points in relation to academic funding and scholars' emotional connections to, especially so-produced, research see Heimstra and Matthews (2024).
- 5 I appreciate this term means different things in different employment contexts. I'm using it to highlight that as scholars we can find ways to become sufficiently well-known or securely employed that it becomes challenging to simply 'fire' us and this means our potential to push back, challenge and undermine leaders who do not lead in considered ways is enhanced. I've always held something to be true – when leaders can't lead effectively, we must lead ourselves.
- 6 I follow Andrew Sayer's lead here in thinking that a post-disciplinary approach is the way we should be working (2000).
- 7 See Matthews (2024) for a discussion of how such an idea actually sits at the foundation of all science, not just the social sciences. Grasping this point is one way in which we can see how the social sciences and philosophy can and have led the epistemological way in 'the academy'.
- 8 Although I do agree with much of it, I do not have space to provide a full recounting of Flyvbjerg's phronetic approach – meaning prioritising prudence, practical reason and 'wisdom' – that he outlines. But I certainly commend his various works to readers.
- 9 Of course, 'out there' would denote a separation from our shared human world which doesn't exist in reality, hence the scare quote. But what I'm capturing here is that there is some importance difference from the world of 'ivory towers' academia and the various interlinked and overlapping human worlds of which we try to get rich and detailed knowledge of when we go and do our research.
- 10 And as my colleague Jack Hardwicke pointed out to me – it is a distinctly privileged position to frame someone's emotional experiences that flow from suffering as purely subjective. And that it is not particularly surprising when such claims are made by (usually middle-class) scholars who have lived relatively comfortable and sheltered lives where their needs are satisfied, and they are free to flourish in various ways.

## References

- Becker HS (2017) Evidence. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Berger P (2002) Whatever happened to sociology. *First Things* 126:27–29
- Bernstein R (1983) Beyond objectivism and relativism. Blackwell, London
- Brown RH (1994) Reconstructing Social Theory after the Postmodern Critique. In: Simons HE, Billig M (Eds.) *After Postmodernism—Reconstructing Ideology Critique*. Sage, London
- Burawoy M (2005) For public sociology. *Am Socio Rev* 70:4–28
- Burkett I (2008) *Social Selves—Theories of Self and Society* (2nd Ed.). London, Sage
- Crossley N (1999) *Intersubjectivity—the Fabric of Social Becoming*. Sage, London
- Flyvbjerg B (2001) *Making Social Science Matter*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Go J (2023) Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory. In: Longhofer W, Winchester D (Eds.) *Social Theory Re-Wired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (3rd ed.). Routledge, London
- Harding S (1991) *Whose Science? Whose knowledge—thinking from Women's lives*. Open University Press, Milton Keynes
- Harding S (2009) Standpoint theories: productively controversial. *Hypatia* 24(4):192–200
- Hiemstra M, Matthews CR (2024) Feeling or Funding? Critical Co-production, Rationality, Emotionality and Axiological Reflections. *Qualitative Inquiry*, online first
- Lyng S, Franks DD (2002) *Sociology of the Real World*. Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield
- MacIntyre A (2009) *Dependent Rational Animals—Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (2nd Ed.). Duckworth, London
- Matthews CR (forthcoming) *Doing Good Social Science*. London, Routledge
- Matthews CR (2024) Knowing Stuff – Myths, Science and Reality. In A Whitehead and J Coady (Eds.) *Myths in Sport Performance*. Sequoia Books
- Matthews CR, Pocock MG (forthcoming) Knowing stuff about things that matter—A practical journey towards abstract ideas. In C. Mackintosh (Ed.) *Doing Qualitative Research in Sport Studies*
- McClung LA (1976) Sociology for whom? *Am Sociol Rev* 41:925–36

- Mead GH (2015) *Mind, Self, and Society—The Definitive Edition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Midgley M (1993) The origin of Ethics. In: Singer P (Ed.) *A Companion to Ethics*. John Wiley and Sons, Newark
- Sayer A (2000) For postdisciplinary studies: sociology and the curse of disciplinary parochialism and imperialism. In: Eldridge J, MacInnes J, Scott S, Warhurst C, Witz A (Eds.) *For sociology: legacies and prospects*. Sociologypress, Durham, p 83–91
- Sayer A (2011) *Why things matter to people*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Schutz A (1970) *Alfred Schutz on Phenomenology and Social Relations*. University of Chicago Press., Chicago
- Stones R (1996) *Sociological reasoning: Towards a past-modern sociology*. MacMillan, Basingstoke
- Sprague J (2016) *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers—Bridging difference*. Rowman and Littlefield, London
- Tur SU, Blanch FR, Wilson C (2010) Developing a collaborative approach to standpoint in Indigenous Australian research. *Aust J Indigenous Educ* 39(1):58–67

## Acknowledgements

We scholars are in a very privileged position to think and do big things that positively impact various communities. But we need to maintain space for this by not being drawn to focus some of the often-meaningless metrics and reward systems that have built up in university settings. I know I swim against the academic tide when I make such arguments, so my thanks go to those who do listen to me when I encourage them to think beyond relatively insignificant issues that can dominate academic life. Thanks to Kath Woodward, Robert Dingwall, Jack Hardwicke, Reem AlHashmi, Marit Hiemstra for offering comments on an earlier version of this work. And to my colleagues on Twitter who engage with my attempts to develop similar arguments in shorter, often-misspelled, ways, I appreciate you very much. This is especially the case for the anonymous person who flagged one of my tweets to my boss, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have spent the time needed to more fully substantiate and articulate my critiques – so thanks for your continued interest in my personal social media accounts.

## Author contributions

The author is responsible for all aspects of this paper.

## Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

## Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

## Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Christopher R. Matthews.

Reprints and permission information is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

**Publisher's note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License, which permits any non-commercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this licence to share adapted material derived from this article or parts of it. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2024